

## VOLUNTEERS GIVE GIFT OF LOVE

by John Mazzulla and Lina DeBor

They make it all seem so easy. According to Marie Crooke, Chief, Voluntary and Chaplain Service at the Bronx VA Medical Center, her group had registered nearly 2,300 volunteers to work at the Wheelchair Games. The goal was 2,000, and yet people were still walking in to help. The Volunteer Registration Desk, the command center for the volunteers, opens early each day and serves as an information booth for veterans and their families until 10:00 p.m.

Volunteers came from Alaska, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Puerto Rico and as far away as Sicily, Italy. They took buses, trains, planes and drove their cars and motorcycles to New York. Some came for the week, some came for days, but they all came to help make New York's National Veterans Wheelchair Games a success for all the competing veterans.

No one understands the importance of volunteering better than the family of veteran Jimmy Hopkins, who passed away on May 30. His family has dedicated their lives to volunteering at the Games in his honor. They include: His mother Barbara Hopkins; sisters Barbara Hopkins-Cox, Callie Christenbury, Carma Christenbury; and a niece, Jynell Hopkins.

Volunteers come to support veterans with the attitude, "I'm here, what can I do?" Among them are VA staff and their

family members from all VA New York/New Jersey Health-care Network medical centers, community members from Staten Island, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan, community organizations, Veterans Service Organizations members, United Parcel Service (UPS) employees, New York City firefighters, student groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, religious groups - the list goes on.

Ed DallaValle, a member of Rolling Thunder Motorcycle Club came to support veterans, as he has done since 1980 as a volunteer at the Lyons VA Medical Center, N.J. "I do it for the Vets. If it wasn't for these guys and all veterans, we would not be celebrating the July Fourth."

George Humphry, Benny Marrero, Alfred Houston and Eric Osborne, Vietnam and Gulf War combat veterans and members of the Bronx River Soldiers group, began working to support the games on Saturday by assisting veterans is the highest calling. "We had to be here to do what we could to our fellow vets in these competitions."



Kim Hoban, a volunteer from Chicago, Ill. has been volunteering at veterans events since she was 13. She has been going to the Golden Age Games for seven years and the National Veterans Wheelchair Games for four years. "To volunteer at these Games brings me great happiness. I have watched these guys progress from year to year and they have watched me grow up".

For Alice Jarvis from Bridge Water Township, N.J. this is her first year at the Games. She is no stranger to volunteering or to veterans. "With so many of my family members being veterans, I can't help but see the need. I see the need and have to help."

The volunteers helped by assisting athletes to and from the Marriott, greeting and helping on arrival at the airport, setting up events, preparing the box lunches and delivering them to the athletes, staffing the registration, and being on the scene for all the many events, and just doing whatever was needed.

They came and gave the gift of their time and their love.



**T H U R S D A Y**

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**S P E C I A L  
E D I T I O N**

### Event Schedule

page 2

### Cleveland Rocks

page 3

### Puerto Rican and British Athletes Make Their Mark

page 3

### Volunteers Give Gift of Love

page 4

## INTRODUCING LAURA SCHWANGER, 2001 SPIRIT OF THE GAMES AWARD WINNER

*Laura Schwanger with Bo Derek at the Slalom Super G.*



"Life is not a spectator sport!" So says Laura Schwanger, 42 (athlete #193) from Williamstown, N.J., the 2001 Spirit of the Games Award winner of the 21st National Veterans Wheelchair Games in New York City.

Schwanger was serving in the U.S. Army in 1982 as an E-4 weather observer, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was medically discharged. For two years, she "just existed," adjusting to life in a wheelchair only nine months after being diagnosed. "I don't remember a lot of high points about those years," she says now. "I read a lot, went out to the pool and got a really

good tan." That was about it until 1985, when a friend took Schwanger to watch the Boston Marathon. She sat by the finish line and looked on with awe as the first twelve competitors finished, all in wheelchairs. "We can go home now," she told her friend. "That is what I'm going to do!"

An athlete before her illness, Schwanger enjoyed basketball, softball, tennis, and track before entering the Army in 1979. Insisting "once a jock, you're always a jock," Schwanger was clearly missing the thrill of competition. After being inspired by the marathon, she researched what was available to her and started out with swimming. She later found her niche in track and field. Over the years, she has tried just about everything. In 1985, she started seriously competing, swimming in the National Sports Festival in Baton Rouge that year. In 1987, she participated in her first National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Ann Arbor, Mich., one of only nine or ten women competing at that time. Schwanger is pleased to see more and more women competing in the Games every year. "That is my goal," she says.

*continued on page 2*



When Laura Schwanger sets out to try something, she gives it her all and then she excels. Over the years, she has competed in numerous national and international events, including three Paralympic Games. In Seoul, Korea in 1988 she won four gold medals. In Barcelona in 1992, she came away with three silver and one bronze, and in 1996 in Atlanta, she took three more silver. While the accomplishments she has made are too numerous to count, she credits her 1990 naming as the Amateur Athlete of the Year by the Dodge Corporation, and the Female Wheelchair Athlete of the Year that same year, as her greatest sports achievements, along with participating in the Paralympics.

It is because of these accomplishments that Schwanger has gone on to have a real impact on disabled youth, the one thing she is most proud of. She has coached a junior wheelchair sports team in the Philadelphia area where she shows, by example, what disabled sports can do for the young athletes. "I try to show them how it's done, and then they say, 'Hey, let me try that!' I think, if anything, that is the greatest impact I have had."

"Sports is what really turned me around," Schwanger says. "It gave me direction, it gave me options, and it showed me I can still be a whole person – even if only half of my body is working. We can really be like everybody else out there, whose 'flaws' we just don't see."

Full of life and vitality, Schwanger was a member of the U.S. Disabled Sports Team for 13

years. While she is now retired from the competitive end of sports, she still enjoys coming to the Wheelchair Games because of the special camaraderie that exists with the other veterans, and to "try to encourage people to go out and try things, to do the best that they can, and to share that bond of military service. Just being around these people, you learn so much," she says. At the Games this week, Schwanger competed as part of the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA) team in Bowling, Slalom, the Slalom "Super G," in which she won, and Softball for the first time.

After the service, Schwanger went back to school and earned her degree in political science, and she is currently working on her graduate degree in counseling psychology. She works at EPVA, where she heads the Philadelphia regional office. In her spare time, Schwanger enjoys golf, kayaking, handcycling, and reading, in addition to her work with disabled youngsters. She receives her health care at the VA Medical Center in Philadelphia.

According to EPVA coach Al Youakim, "You just don't find many people like Laura. She works very hard at everything she does and she's accomplished many great things. Laura goes out of her way to help other people and she is a fantastic person to coach. She is a real inspiration."

On becoming disabled, Laura Schwanger says, "Some doors closed because of my disability, but other doors opened

... you need to find what you are good at, find out what you like to do — whether it is sports, arts and crafts, music, or whatever — then just go out there and do it. Don't be a spectator, be a part of it! Don't just sit there and let life pass you by!"

## A VET SAYS THANKS

Russell Wolfe, Thomas, W.Va., had the Wheelchair Games on his mind as he prepared for the trip to New York City. That thought was almost cut short when someone ran his car off the road on June 23, doing serious damage to the trunk of his car and destroying his airgun, bows and arrows, more than \$1800 worth of equipment. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt.



Russell Wolfe's demolished car.

Thanks to the help of sponsors Blackwater Sports and the community, Wolfe got together to replace the equipment and get him to the Games in time. Wolfe is grateful and would like to thank all who helped.

In 2002, the 22<sup>nd</sup> National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Cleveland are expected to be one of the best ever. Hosted by the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center and the Buckeye Chapter, Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Games promise to offer something for everyone. This city on the lake has experienced a major renaissance in recent years, and will bring many memories to participants.

First to be considered is the location for the Games. The Cleveland Convention Center is near Lake Erie in Downtown Cleveland. The mall area outside the Center was recently renovated, resulting in better access, especially for wheelchairs.

Most of the venues will be at this one facility, the site for many of the events including opening and closing ceremonies, slalom, weightlifting, basketball, quad rugby, air guns, table tennis, and 9-ball, to

name a few. Other locations are nearby and include Cleveland State University Natatorium, a world class swimming facility for world class athletes and Palisades Palace Lanes, with 96 bowling lanes. Track and Field venues are being finalized, but all will be within an easy trip from the Convention Center and hotels.

The host hotels for the games are all within close proximity to the Convention Center. They include the Marriott, the Cleveland Renaissance Hotel, the Wyndham, the Sheraton, and the Holiday Inn Express.

There's a lot to like about Cleveland. Its flat terrain makes navigating the city quite easy, and there are many exciting activities within the downtown area. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum provides a 150,000 square foot experience in the history of the songs and artists, and holds the world's largest single collection of

rock and roll memorabilia.

Next door, the Great Lakes Science Center, offers more than 165,000 square feet of exhibits and interactive displays at North Coast Harbor. The east and west banks of the Cuyahoga River, as it spills into Lake Erie, include converted warehouses waterfront eateries and pubs known collectively as the Flats.

Sports enthusiasts will enjoy the opportunity to watch the Indians play in Jacobs Field, and visit the new Browns stadium. Shopping is fun and easy in Tower City Center and the Galleria, collection of both shops and boutiques in covered downtown malls. Those who like to venture into micro-breweries or brew-pubs will find a few to explore in the area. Performing arts such as the Cleveland Orchestra and the Playhouse Square Center are also entertainment options.

Come to Cleveland ready to rock and roll.

## PUERTO RICAN AND BRITISH ATHLETES MAKE THEIR MARK

Puerto Rican and British athletes enjoyed the competition and camaraderie of the 21<sup>st</sup> National Veterans Wheelchair Games in New York City. This year, the Puerto Rican team was 18 athletes strong while a dozen British war veterans made the journey across "the pond."

JoAnn Rodriguez, an Army veteran from Levittown, P.R., says the Games have "changed her life physically and socially." She credits the Games with helping with her recovery. She's having fun in New York, meeting new people and visiting with friends she made during previous games.

Paul Jackson from Tamworth,

Great Britain, is participating in his third Games. He described New York as a "new city" and he is impressed with the tall skyscrapers and modern architecture. This year he took part in the Javelin, Discus, and Shot Put, Air Gun and Basketball events. Keith Merrie, Jackson's coach, and a Warrant Officer in the Royal Corps of Signals, said British athletes must compete for a position on their team. Mr. Merrie said that British athletes train for months to win one of the twelve coveted team positions.

Rodriguez and Jackson are looking forward to participating in the 22<sup>nd</sup> National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Cleveland, Ohio.



JoAnn Rodriguez competes in bowling.